



Briefs on Writing

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WRITING & LITERACY

When Children Write to Persuade: What We Need to Know about Children in the Primary Grades

Why teach young children to write? Can we expect five-year-olds to write? What more do young children need to be doing in school other than learning to read? When do children write to persuade in the way that adults do? The more we examine what children know about "writing to get things done," (e.g., to manage their work and their relationships) the more we are surprised. In studies from the NCSWL, we are exploring ways to enable children's abilities for writing that often go unnoticed. Having recently observed young children writing to persuade others, we are finding out how the primary school teacher can encourage children to use writing to get things done. We think primary school curricula offer children ways to develop social awareness through writing. We believe teachers should be rewarded for recognizing moments when children share differing views and values with their peers through writing.

For centuries children received instruction in what were understood as the "civilizing" aspects of public speaking and great literature. The youngest children in classical Roman schools memorized and presented fables and epic poems. In modern classrooms, children still read and write stories, poems, songs and plays. Almost as travellers to a foreign land, children learn the values of their community by learning its traditional stories and songs, and by learning how to hold polite conversation. Children emulate stories and styles that their teachers carefully select, mimicking these in great detail. However, before we recognized children's hidden talents, only adults seemed to use writing as a tool for influencing others. Writing to peers has not always been viewed as a way to teach persuasive writing, particularly in the primary grades. Today, children write to their peers and practice ways to persuade an audience to see a new point of view.

Today's children, writing to persuade

Recent research at the NCSWL is providing some interesting insights about how children learn to persuade. For instance, we have learned that children actively *explore* the possibilities for persuading others through writing. In one study we observed six and seven-year-olds write stories — without a teacher's advice — to persuade their classmates to join them in play. In other studies we found that children actively seek each other's reactions and suggestions about the effects of their writing. This work not only shows children going beyond the imitation of teacherly examples, but also that by writing to their peers children can create important social ties with others. We are learning that it is never too soon for children to find out that writing is a

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Anne Dyson, "Negotiating a Permeable Curriculum: On Literacy, Diversity, and the Interplay of Children's and Teachers' Worlds," NCTE Concept Papers No. 9 (1994); and other works.

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powerful social skill. We find that children learn about persuasion from their peers when they:

- ☞ influence peers for purposes that are important to them
- ☞ share ideas about what persuasive techniques “really work”
- ☞ collect new ideas for stories and other written pieces

When asked, children are eager and enthusiastic to grow in these ways and work with each other. In fact, children invest much of their personalities and beliefs about the world in their writing. Boys often write about superheroes’ battles, while girls may infuse their superhero characters with concerns about others’ feelings. Children who like rap music may invent stories and poems that they can “sing” to their audiences.

Children writing in the multi-cultural classroom

Teachers may believe they best serve children’s learning by guiding them away from telling a battle-story or singing their compositions. However, we find teachers are more successful when they encourage the individual language styles children bring to the classroom. When children share with each other what interests or moves them, they develop new social awareness.

We have been looking at what makes writing instruction so important for children. We want to know, for example, “What happens when children begin to notice their cultural similarities and differences in these collaborative activities?” That is, what happens in a classroom when children begin to raise questions about whose styles of communicating are best, whose stories should be emulated, whose advice for crafting a poem should be accepted?

We find children in a multi-cultural classroom bring a myriad of expecta-

tions and beliefs about written pieces. In one year-long case study, we observed Jameel, a verbally gifted, African-American first-grader, struggle to understand why audiences for his writing should be “allowed” to make demands for more information and clarity. He preferred to write pieces that had a musical quality and relied on plays-on-words, verbal imagery, rhyming, and rhythmic patterns to delight his peers. Although he felt that writing is more persuasive as musical poetry, some of his classmates disagreed. Some classmates insisted that writing is better when it informs, much like a news report. As Anne Dyson explains, “Jameel’s case illustrates the importance of audience and purpose to kids...at least in classrooms where there is some kind of public forum.” We found that the children explored their differences on their own after their teacher encouraged them to try out writing that can be sung as well as pieces that can inform.

For this African-American child, as for other children, first grade was a critical year during which he tried to understand his teacher’s and classmates’ ways with words and struggled to be heard and appreciated. Had his teacher not helped students to appreciate different styles, he could have felt sidelined, misunderstood, unappreciated. In multi-cultural classrooms, we cannot afford to lose the trust or enthusiastic participation of children who are traditionally labelled “at-risk.” This was especially true for the child we describe here, who was homeless at the time of the study.

What helps children improve their writing? A “permeable” curriculum

One may ask, how does the writing teacher recognize her students’ differences and enrich their repertoires, exercise their collaborative skills, and enlist their enthusiasm for learning? To

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answer, we need what we might call the "permeable" curriculum.

Recall that in the traditional writing curricula, children are expected to mimic ways of writing that teachers value. At the same time, children do not use writing to influence their peers because those "childish" ways are not sanctioned by the culture of schooling. In a sense, the traditional curriculum has kept the teacher from letting the students' ideas about writing permeate the lesson plans.

In contrast, the permeable curriculum allows children's own ideas about writing into the curriculum. The goal of this curriculum is that children will broaden their skills for writing to persuade, to "get things done." Teachers incorporate the topics children want to talk about, the ways children want to present ideas to their peers, and especially, the effect that children want to have on their readers. We now have evidence that even the youngest children bring to school a sense of how to tell someone a story and what story topics are best. At the NCSWL, we have found that children develop new persuasive talents when teachers build on children's current, embryonic knowledge. We have also witnessed many successful classrooms that have shown us, their teachers, and administrators that children share and are enriched by each others' new ideas.

In the permeable curriculum, children work on developing their ability to influence an audience through writing. No longer merely imitating the writing of adults, children use writing as a social tool. We have closely followed the social talk and writing of several second-graders who were fortunate to have been in a classroom where teachers recognized the value of a permeable curriculum. In a recent study, we describe a classroom activity called "Author's Theater" in which children

X-Men

X-men
 Once upon a time there was a group of people it was the X-Men
 Storm said I am tired of changing the weather.
 but you have to keep working Arkangel said. I'm tired of working too long said.
 I have to save the world every time she fall I get tired of fighting bad guys. Ready to fight and they all had fun the end

wrote stories and chose classmates to act them out. The writer would read a story, and classmates after some rehearsal at recess would perform it. One child, a new student in the class, became more skilled at developing story plots when friends he wanted to impress asked for more "action" in his stories. Sammy went from writing plot-less stories to action-filled stories about X-Men superheroes when he discovered that other boys in the class wanted more "action" to perform during Author's Theater. As Sammy wrote more interesting and exciting plots for the other boys to act out, Sammy found himself joining the boys at recess and collaborating on new stories.

While Sammy jockeyed for more social recognition from popular classmates, Tina and Holly complained that the X-Men stories had no female characters in them. Holly wrote stories of X-Men who acted out more relationship issues than battles and cast Sammy in the role of this new, relationship-conscious hero. Gradually, Tina and Holly began to persuade their classmates to include female superhero characters in the super-hero stories. By the end of the school year, Sammy wrote an action-

filled story that he cast with both girls and boys in the classroom. Responding to other children's needs and requests, Sammy learned to collaborate on important projects, to use audience feedback, and developed his "sense of story" in the process. Tina and Holly learned they could use writing to make some changes in their environment and to get others to treat them fairly. In an innovative writing classroom, Sammy, Tina, Holly and their classmates witnessed the power of writing to influence and persuade.

But how can all children benefit from a permeable curriculum?

We expect more work in this area will make specific details about the permeable curriculum available to all teachers of writing. But putting the permeable writing curriculum into practice is a complicated feat. Both the curriculum

must be adjusted and teachers must reawaken their sensitivity to children's beliefs about writing. Our research is aimed at uncovering some of children's persuasive abilities and examines successful practices in the classroom. As this research continues we hope to learn more about how to help children develop through writing their already sophisticated sense of the social world.

For more information . . .

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The Center supports educational research and development to look at how students learn to write; how teachers can best help students from diverse cultural backgrounds; how writing can be used effectively in disciplines such as history; how social forces (such as ethnic background, family relations, social class, and community) affect success in school; how we might develop better ways to measure skills; and how new technologies and new demands in the workplace affect what literate skills students need to acquire. The Center involves classroom teachers in helping to shape the Center's research agenda and in making use of findings from the research. Underlying the Center's research effort is the belief that research must both move into the classroom and come from it; thus, the Center supports "practice-sensitive research" for "research-sensitive practice."

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